DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 406 646 CS 012 778

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TITLE The Expanding Role of School Psychologists: Planning, Designing, Implementing, and Evaluating a Program To Prevent Early Reading Failure.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of School Psychologists (28th, Atlanta, GA, March 12-16, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counselor Role; *Decoding (Reading); *Early Intervention; Grade 1; High School Students; Primary Education; Program Effectiveness; Program Implementation; Reading Research; *School Psychologists
IDENTIFIERS *Phonemic Awareness; Phonological Awareness; Spalding County School District GA

ABSTRACT

A study examined the effectiveness of the Preventing Early Reading Failure Project in the Griffin-Spalding County School System (Griffin, Georgia) during the 1994-95 school year. The approach was based on research on phonemic awareness and phonological recoding. The treatment group of 39 first-grade students received classroom reading instruction based upon the intervention approach along with small group supplemental training 4 times a week, 10 minutes each session, by trained high school honor students. The matched control group of 39 students received traditional first grade reading instruction. Results indicated that after 24 weeks of intervention, the treatment group made significantly more progress in word decoding skills at the time of posttest. These students were also able to correctly read significantly more sight words than the control group. Findings emphasize the changing role of the school psychologist to include planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating effective intervention programs. (Author/RS)

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ABSTRACT

The Expanding Role of School Psychologists: Planning, Designing, Implementing, and Evaluating a Program to Prevent Early Reading Failure

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This presentation introduced the key concepts of the Preventing Early Reading Failure Project, which was implemented during the 1994-95 school year. It highlighted the research study results and emphasized our experiences in planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating such a program within our school district. The empirical literature on early reading difficulties was studied. Then a reading program was designed to prevent early reading failure that was research-based, "user friendly", and inexpensive. The approach was based upon research on phonemic awareness and phonological recoding (PA/PR).

The effectiveness of the program on the reading achievement of "at-risk" first graders was evaluated. The treatment group (n=39) received classroom reading instruction based upon the intervention approach along with small group supplemental training for four times a week, ten minutes each session, by trained high school honor students. The matched control group (n=39) received traditional first grade reading instruction. Results showed that, after 24 weeks of intervention, the treatment group made significantly more progress in word decoding skills at the time of post-test. These students also were able to correctly read significantly more sight words than the control group.

The presentation emphasized the changing role of the School Psychologist to include planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating effective intervention programs.

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The Preventing Early Reading Failure Project was developed by school personnel because of consistent and vocal concerns of teachers in the early elementary grades: "Too many of our students aren't learning to read!" Research studies dealing with reading achievement were examined. "Phonemic awareness" and "phonological re-coding" were terms that were consistent and prevalent in the review of the research. Phonemic awareness is the ability to perceive a spoken word as a sequence of individual sounds (or phonemes). Phonological re-coding is a metacognitive strategy in which students identify and spell unfamiliar words by translating the phonemes (i.e., smallest speech units or sound categories) into graphemes (written symbols, such as letters or groups of letters that represent phonemes). Simply put, to be able to read, children must be able to understand that the spoken word can be translated into a sequence of individual sounds (phonemic awareness) and that these sounds can be translated into letters for reading and writing (phonological re-coding).

Studies have shown both correlational relationships and causal links between phonemic awareness and phonological re-coding and with reading. There also are studies showing that these learned skills transfer to other settings and that they persist for several years after actual training. There even is evidence that children with diagnosed reading problems also can improve their reading skills with such training.

With this information, an intervention approach was developed that was based upon research findings, was inexpensive to implement, and was "user-friendly" in terms of ease of training. Along with training teachers and paraprofessionals, Teacher Cadets (High School Senior honor students) also were taught how to use this approach.

With the help of the school system's psychologists, teachers, and Teacher Cadets, a research project was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. (It was funded by two small grants.) All first grade students enrolled in either the treatment or control school were screened for reading problems. Forty-nine students from the treatment school were identified and matched with forty-nine students who scored similarly and were enrolled in the control school.

The treatment phase extended from mid-October 1994 to mid-April 1995. The treatment group received classroom reading instruction based upon the intervention approach along with individual or small group supplemental training in phonemic awareness and phonological re-coding (PA/PR) four times a week and ten minutes each session by the trained Teacher Cadets. The control group received traditional first grade classroom instruction in reading.

Data collection was conducted 24 weeks after the beginning of the program. While the treatment and control groups had similar word de-coding skills prior to the PA/PR instruction, the treatment group made significantly ($p<.001$) more progress in word de-coding at the time of post-test. The treatment group also was able to correctly read significantly ($p<.01$) more sight words than the comparison group. This suggests that the students who received the PA/PR training were able to generalize their word de-coding skills to reading actual words. These results indicate that the PA/PR training had a

significant and positive effect on the reading progress of the at-risk readers to such an extent that they actually were over-achieving! Both the word de-coding and the word recognition skill levels of these struggling young readers were above their grade level placement after receiving the intervention.

This project highlights how school psychologists can make a positive impact on children's development through programs that are broader and more systemic in nature than their traditional role generally involves. It provides a unique opportunity for the profession of school psychology. Because the formal education of school psychologists offers more research and program evaluation courses than does the training of other school personnel, school psychologists can take a leadership role in planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating school-based improvement programs. From a research perspective, field-based school psychologists often have an advantage over other researchers (e.g., university faculty) because they have opportunities to study several children engaged in important development tasks (in this case, learning to read) in one of their natural contexts. This, of course, is their schools.

An important role of the school psychologist, then, is to take important research and translate it into viable and practical strategies, interventions, and programs that work. School psychologists are in a particularly good position to take on this role. Their profession blends the psychological base of knowledge as it applies to children and schools with an expertise in research and development. Because they know schools better than most other researchers and because they know research better than other school personnel, school psychologists can lead the way in making the important link between research and the needs of children and schools. They make this link when they see children individually in their evaluation role (and that is important in and of itself). School psychologists also can make this link by developing programs that can improve the academic development of larger numbers of students.

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